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Movie Review

"Been Rich All My Life": Dancers' career is quite a feat

By Tom Keogh

Special to The Seattle Times

Feeling old? A little creaky?

If you could use a jump-start, take in "Been Rich All My Life." The jaunty but tender documentary by Heather Lyn MacDonald concerns the determination of a handful of octogenarian dancers who refuse to vanish into history.

But not just any dancers: Elaine Ellis, Marion Coles, Cleo Hayes, Fay Ray and Bertye Lou Wood were once principal hoofers in the legendary Harlem clubs and theaters of the 1930s. More than just scantily clad ornaments, these former chorus girls from the Apollo Theatre, Cotton Club and other jazz havens in New York City were real, hard-working stars who performed in top-to-bottom new shows every week.

In 1985, the oldest and most experienced dancer among them, Wood, contacted the others. She proposed forming an act that she could choreograph but was too frail to perform in.

The Silver Belles were thus born, four spirited and strong women (plus their leader) who still had some of the sinuous moves and crisp, tap steps from the old days. They became a hit wherever they played, including — as MacDonald captures in performance footage — the Apollo.

"Been Rich" catches up with the Belles almost two decades after their origin, still working and defying sundry diseases, loss of balance and other hardships of old age. The first half of the film is like a joyful party, full of mischief and reminiscences about escaping childhood hardships by becoming dancers.

But the film deepens and becomes emotionally resonant as Wood, Ellis and the others talk about life after Harlem. Working with and befriending the likes of Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson were early highlights. But, as for any of us, there was much, much else — good and bad, beautiful and harsh — that followed exciting times.

"Been Rich" reminds us that every life contains many acts worth hearing about, not just a select few.

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[enlarge](#) **FIRST RUN FEATURES**
 The Silver Belles are, from left, Cleo Hayes, Marion Coles, Elaine Ellis and Fay Ray. The Belles are 1930s showgirls, now in their 80s and 90s.

Movie review ★★★

[Showtimes and trailer](#)

"Been Rich All My Life," a documentary with Elaine Ellis, Marion Coles, Cleo Hayes, Fay Ray, Bertye Lou Wood. Directed by Heather Lyn MacDonald. 80 minutes. Not rated, suitable for all ages. Grand Illusion.